LCL Theory Notes for Zoom UnConference, 'El Paso' 2020

[Gary will have first told the story of how this idea came into being & developed]

You should all have the document on the five 'leading causes of life' and their grounding. It's an intellectual framework with considerable reach and depth; but, to be clear, it's not an orthodoxy to which all should succumb. Instead, it's an invitation to join in thinking about the 'leading causes of life' and their practical significance.

To help that along, let me share some images that express key points.

The five 'leading cause of life' are agency, coherence, hope, connection, and inter-generativity (which we also call 'blessing'). But they will be misunderstood unless two things are appreciated from the outset ….

First: The LCL framework is *not* a toolset. It's more like a canopy enclosing the five basic ideas. These ideas express simply, but comprehensively, the central dynamic energies of human life. They are not a collection of static parts waiting to be welded together; they are *angles of view* on an organic whole through which life flows, like the wind and the shifting sand. Rather than a toolset, it's complexity theory—with many practical implications.

Second: The LCL framework takes for granted *biological* life. Without that, we can't begin to talk about *human* life. But the focus of the 'leading causes of life' is human life. It's about how humans are present in the world. Above all, it's about an extra-ordinary set of capacities that mark us as being and becoming human in the first place. Forget that and you might as well forget the framework.

The first defining human capacity is '**agency**'. It is crucial to grasp what this means. I mean by agency our 'creative freedom'—*our causal capacity to change nature and ourselves in ways that nature could never do otherwise*. Why causal? Because of the profound and evident effects of this capacity. Even though our creative freedom is an internal capacity, not measurable through our physical senses or empirically, it is extraordinary in its impact. Its effects are everywhere, in degree way beyond any other creature we know. Everything about this Zoom gathering is an immediate example.

Let me unpack this a bit so that its full depth becomes visible.

I love thinking about a symphony orchestra to understand just how powerful this creative freedom, our agency, actually is.

This photo is of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, playing Beethoven's 9th choral symphony. The sound it produces is *awe*-inspiring, spine-tingling, *sublime* in its precision. What one needs to create it, is in itself extraordinary. Not just the skills of the musicians and conductor working in exquisite harmony, but the wide range of instruments built by astonishing craftspeople. Also, the precise wood someone harvested and honed, the strings someone finely spun, the paper someone invented, the notes written on it with ink someone else conceived. It's a massive collaborative accomplishment spanning literally hundreds of years and probably as many people, beyond those in the orchestra. The creative freedom this represents couldn't be richer and more expressive of the human spirit. And, obviously: there is more than agency here. There's **coherence** too, and **connection**, and **intergenerativity**.

Key to our creative freedom is our capacity *to add to nature something that is not in it*. In particular, what we add are *symbolic systems*, like languages and mathematics. They allow us to imagine what is possible and bring it into being. This orchestra demonstrates this as well as anything too. To understand how they can combine this dramatic range of musical instruments into one sound is to see what they are reading—the notes that tell them what to play, when, and how.

So powerful are these capacities that we can, should we so choose, through commission or omission, destroy the world and ourselves along with it. We know all too well that we are capable of using our creative freedom both for good or for evil, constructively or destructively. Our creative freedom is good in itself but what we intend to do with it is ambiguous. We must choose which it is to be.

In short, we bear moral responsibility for our presence and action in the world. Whether or not we accept this responsibility, it is an irrevocable companion to our creative freedom. The effects of our causal agency are real in this regard. And no one, no guardians or other authorities, however much they shape or impact on us, can choose whether we will orient ourselves to the world and to each other for the good or not, for our self-interest or for the sake of all and of the world itself.

In this sense, we can choose life or death. And it's not as if life is divorced from the realities of death. This photo of the ironies of 'social distancing' in the time of COVID-19 reminds us of that. The virus exposes the fissures and fractures of society in ways we seldom see so clearly.

So the metaphor of the 'leading causes of life' is not happy talk. Rather, like all potent metaphors, it breaks open new meaning about what it means to be and become human in this world.

That we are capable as human beings of great evil is obvious. Equally obvious is that we are also capable of great good. In that lies **hope**, another cause of life. Again, let me return to the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. The photo you saw before is cropped. It comes from a performance of Beethoven's 9th in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin on the day, 30 years later, that the wall came down.

In the final movement of this epoch-making symphony there is a pause that has been described as 'a moment of silence for the dead, the fallen, the murdered.' The symphony then ends with Schiller's 'Ode to Joy', meant to be something the world takes to heart, an anthem for humanity itself, something whose 'gigantic, irrefutable musical power is a wellspring of endless renewal and possibility.'

Humans built the Berlin wall; humans, not least those that began the Monday marches out of the Nikolai Church in Leipzig, helped tear it down. This is an example of agency, coherence, connection, intergenerativity, and hope in one, and it's potently expressive of our life as human beings. That's what we want to work with and that's what we want to understand better.

Additional credits: Bedouin tent, Paul Laurienti, at an LCLI Workshop; South African soldiers patrol a men's hostel, The Guardian, 15 Apr., 2020.